

# Strategy and Force Structure in an Interwar Period

By FREDERICK W. KAGAN



Italian troops in Ethiopia, 1935.

**T**he contemporary era does not represent a strategic pause, but rather an interwar period, and history suggests that the next significant conflict will not be as distant as many would believe. Since 1648 major powers have engaged in a full-scale war approximately every thirty years. And from 1783 onward the United States has sent sizable forces into harm's way every twenty years. To assume that this cycle has suddenly ended is wishful thinking. It is no more the case than the notion that the economic cycle of booms and busts

has come to a halt. Accordingly, maintaining international stability and preparing to deter or defeat enemies in the future are urgent tasks. They cannot be put off, underresourced, or ignored except at grave peril. The primary security goal for the Nation in this interwar period must be prolonging the current epoch of peace and prosperity as long as possible and being ready to fight and win the conflict that will ultimately end it.

## Labor of the Liberal State

The requirement to remain engaged and ready even in an era of relative peace is the most difficult challenge that can face a democracy. The track record of democratic nations is poor. After the Crimean War and the Wars of German

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Unification, Great Britain largely disengaged from the international scene and maintained a peacetime army so small that German leaders quipped that they would have it arrested if the British landed to support an ally. As a result, Britain conspicuously failed to prevent a series of wars in the 1860s and 1870s and proved utterly

unable to deter the Germans in 1914. Britain's weakness, appeasement, and consequent failure to deter Hitler in the 1930s has

been well rehearsed elsewhere. But the record of the United States is little better. The refusal by America to remain engaged in Europe after World War I greatly facilitated efforts by Hitler and Mussolini to shatter the peace. Failure to manage international affairs in the Pacific over the same period led directly to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The only recent occasion when a liberal democracy maintained the necessary force to deter an enemy in peacetime and to win without a conflict was the Cold War. For almost half a century, with conspicuous ups and downs, the United States fielded combat formations capable enough to persuade the Soviet Union that victory would be unlikely. The willingness to engage in Korea and Vietnam, whatever the regional consequences of such conflicts, illustrated American resolve. This prolonged policy of engagement was made possible largely because the Soviets were so clearly and obviously an imminent threat. It was also relatively easier to persuade the public of the need for large peacetime defense expenditures. At the same time, leaders remembered Munich and were determined to avoid a repeat.

The lack of an obvious threat makes the task much harder today, recalling the 1920s when weakness and disengagement laid the groundwork for disasters in the 1930s. Only by recognizing that military preparedness is urgent in periods of apparent peace just like during periods of tension can the United States avoid falling into the same trap. Such readiness requires the accomplishment of three tasks: constantly shaping the international environment to maintain stability

in regions of vital national interest and to deter aggression anywhere; maintaining the ability to defeat at least two major regional aggressors simultaneously; and preparing for a future large-scale conflict.

*Shaping.* The aim of military operations other than war like Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo is two-fold. One is maintaining peace and stability in regions of vital national interest, such as Europe and the Western Hemisphere. Any failure to ensure stability in those regions will create power vacuums when traditional structures collapse. The likelihood that such vacuums will be filled by friendly nations is low, because most allies have disarmed even more thoroughly than the United States and abandoned their responsibility for maintaining peace, placing the burden on America's shoulders.

On the other hand, if the United States permits an actor to use force it signals that would-be aggressors will not be opposed. That message is likely to encourage the boldest to try to revise the international order by arms. In the best case, fail-

Marines landing at Tok Sok Ri, Foal Eagle '00.



U.S. Army (James P. Johnson)

ing to engage in a lesser conflict against weaker enemies can draw the Nation into a far more serious conflict against greater threats. In the worst case, unchecked aggression may lay the groundwork for the extremely rapid destruction of a peaceful world order.

*Maintaining.* Though the military is most likely to be engaged in small-scale contingencies day-to-day, they must above all be ready to meet the challenges of a major regional aggressor with little notice. In fact, they must be ready to meet two such challenges at once. Yet it has become



National Archives

Germans occupying  
Rhineland, 1936.

fashionable to claim that the two major regional contingency (MRC) force sizing paradigm simply preserves the status quo. Because this force requirement has been explicitly tied to specific threats, Iraq and North Korea, and as both now seem weak, many argue that this concept can be abandoned. Moreover, such a change would allow the United States to reduce forces and refocus resources on military transformation or domestic needs. Both assumptions are wrong.

First, the United States has not maintained a two theater capability since 1993. The study of the origin of the force structure adopted at that time reveals that even its architects did not believe that it was able to handle two major theater wars nearly simultaneously. Nor was the Chairman, General Colin Powell, USA, confident that even the larger structure dubbed the base force in 1991 could deal with two wars. Powell stated that responding to a Desert Storm contingency at the same time as a contingency on the Korean peninsula would push the Armed Forces to the breaking point and that the United States would then no longer have the capability to deal with anything that might happen elsewhere. And the military has been significantly cut since that claim was made. Simply abandoning the two war requirement does not provide any rational basis for reducing the military.

Second, a two theater capability is not simply a randomly generated construct. It is a vital component of strategy. The failure to maintain a force capable of dealing simultaneously with two major theater wars means that, in responding to one major act of aggression, the President must be unable to respond to others for the duration of

the conflict. Such an inability means the National Command Authorities are likely to shirk from committing all or most all available forces to a single contingency if it leaves U.S. interests and allies vulnerable elsewhere. More likely, the Nation would simply fail to take action.

This is precisely what happened to Great Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. Contemplating major theater conflicts in Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Far East, London did not support forces to meet even a single theater standard. British military leaders repeatedly advised against acting during the Corfu crisis of 1923, the Ethiopian crisis of 1935–36, and German remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936 as it would expose vital interests in the Far East to Japanese aggression. Partly because of that advice, Britain did not respond adequately to any of those crises, paving the way for further aggression.

A great power that can meet only one major challenge at a time makes it more likely that a second enemy will take advantage of that power's preoccupation with the first. The focus on the European conflict in 1941 was a precondition to the Japanese attack on British and American possessions. Great Britain looked to the United States to protect its interests in the Far East, but one cannot control the military policy of its allies. As a result, even though Britain was victorious, its position in the Far East and in the world was compromised.

*Preparing.* While no state can challenge the Nation globally at present, such a threat could arise in the form of either a single state which devotes energy to obtaining such a capability—like Russia or China—or a coalition of states. In that regard, the steady improvement in relations between Russia and China that has gone largely unremarked on may be an ominous sign.

It is commonplace in strategic discussions to assert that the United States would have ample warning of the rise of such a threat, thus there would be plenty of time to either deter or defeat it. Such confidence is unwarranted. There probably would be considerable warning, but alarms that alert planners that it is time to rearm are almost always insufficient to convince democratic leaders and legislatures. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 should have been warning enough to Great Britain, and indeed its military leaders concluded in 1932 that the time had come to rearm. But it was only the crises of 1935–36, coupled with the expansion of the *Luftwaffe*, that convinced politicians to support massive increases in defense spending.

There is no reason to think that the United States will behave more responsibly. The desire



Launching missile  
during Allied Force.



U.S. Navy (Renzo Arantiz)

for peace is in fact likely to work against it. What is more, the change that triggered the rise of Hitler and the turn by Berlin toward aggression was the Great Depression—an event that also hampered Britain's ability to respond. Likewise, a global economic slowdown could precipitate, without warning, the growth of our next major enemy. America is likely to focus on the domestic consequences of that economic crisis for far too

long at the expense of starting a prudent rearmament while there is time.

The Nation should thus consider what is necessary to meet a major challenge. The military industrial base has been dramatically contracted in tandem with the reduction of the Armed Forces. The defense conversion since the Cold War has succeeded too well. It could be that when the next crisis arises the United States will find itself unable to spend the funds that a nervous Congress appropriates because there will be no firms to bid on

the contracts. This is precisely what occurred in Britain in the mid-1930s. Its base had atrophied and been converted to civilian production in the lean years of peace, and when Parliament finally authorized increased defense expenditures, the money could not be spent.

Force expansion will also require a cadre of experienced leaders on every level to train others even as they lead their units. Too small a force cannot meet that challenge, so training will be rushed and haphazard, and units will go into combat under inexperienced leaders, as occurred in World War II. It must be remembered that although the Armed Forces are sized primarily to deal with current and likely contingencies, the need to expand them rapidly should not be ignored.

### Heavy Lifting

These tasks must all be achieved at once. All accomplish essential parts of the same whole. We must continually shape the international environment by the use of force or its threat, and by stability and peace operations when appropriate. The best way to take advantage of a time of peace is aggressive involvement in the world, and the maintenance of adequate forces to accomplish all three of the tasks outlined above will make that possible.

Beyond the three main tasks any leading state must perform in peacetime, the United States must transform the military to meet the changing nature of war. This demand is particularly great because an apparent technological lead convinces many that no enemy can ever challenge America in that arena. Thus technological transformation now poses two great dangers. First, the United States is likely to be complacent and delay transformation, avoid fielding systems, and defer costs on the grounds that the Nation still has a comfortable lead. The likely result will be failure to prepare the Armed Forces to fight future wars. Second, it may be led to believe that America has found a technological panacea that makes it unnecessary to maintain large forces at all, since small, highly-technical forces seem so effective. The peril is that the Nation will move toward having the most technically advanced brigade in the world, which could be overwhelmed by larger if less sophisticated enemies.

Such was the fate of the British expeditionary force in 1914. At that time Great Britain was the only major power with a long-service volunteer force rather than universal military service and a trained reserve. As a result, that force was the best in the world and fought with incredible skill and tenacity against the German attack. But it was

both too limited to deter the attack and too small to stop it; so it was wiped out almost to the man. Britain was forced to sit the war out in 1915 and into 1916 as a new force was raised and trained from scratch. That force, in its turn, inadequately trained and inexpertly led, suffered horrendous casualties and came very near to complete collapse before America was drawn into the conflict.

Worse, since the technological emphasis is now on long-range precision-guided munitions, some may come to think that global presence is unnecessary because the Nation can respond decisively with forces based in the Continental United States. Action taken on such a conviction could be catastrophic. It makes sense only when military capabilities are divorced entirely from the strategic goals they are designed to accomplish, which occurs in academic circles but not in the real world. Global forward presence signals commitment to opposing aggression and maintaining peace. Withdrawing forces from their positions would immediately increase instability by signalling that America is no longer committed to the peace.

For over half a century the United States has taught the world to understand that its commitment in any region can be measured by the number of troops deployed, not by its global strike capabilities. Strike capabilities did not deter North Korea in 1950, North Vietnam in the 1960s, Iraq in 1990, or Serbia more recently. They are unlikely to deter aggressors in the future.

Moreover, a mixture of ground forces, theater air and missile forces, and global strike capabilities is more powerful than global strike capabilities alone. When an enemy knows that it faces only a bomber attack, it can turn off radars, bury equipment, disperse forces, and sit tight. If its will is not broken under attack—and the historical record suggests that it will not be—there will be only two options. The United States must abandon the conflict without achieving its objectives or exterminate the enemy force. Even if it annihilates an enemy the Nation may not achieve its goals without deploying ground forces to secure them. Airpower can only provide an argument, however persuasive, that an enemy should change its way of doing business. Ground forces alone can force it to change.

When ground forces are added to precision-strike systems, the task is greatly complicated for an enemy. Now it must maintain forces in combat formations, which provide better targets for missile strikes; and it must keep its radar and communications going, making it easier to hit targets. In short, eliminating the possibility of

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British outpost—  
Sudan defence force  
near Khartoum.

ground force deployment greatly complicates efforts to use precision-strike capabilities and makes it difficult to meet objectives. The history of the military art is the history of the increasing integration of all types of forces into combined-arms and joint units that bring an array of capabilities to bear. Forces that have performed that integration best have almost always won.

Technological transformation must thus be fully joint. It must be tied to an agreed vision of future warfare that is flexible enough to allow for unforeseen changes in war and the international environment. Above all, it must be undertaken much more urgently. America's apparent technological lead can be largely attributed to the fact that no other state has been working arduously to prepare to fight us. We depend heavily on computerization while civilian computer technology is spreading across the globe. If an enemy concludes that war with America is imminent, it will find ways to convert civilian technology to military purposes, and any technological lead will evaporate.

### Transformation Trauma

The next war will almost certainly begin at a time and a place chosen by the enemy. Delays and failure to maintain and deploy adequate forces may even encourage a preemptive attack, as happened in 1939. Hitler was well aware that by 1942 the British would field large and modern forces equipped with excellent aircraft and decent tanks. His attack on Poland in 1939 resulted in part from the belief that it was then or never. America must be cautious and not present an enemy with a window of temptation, though the current pace of technological transformation suggests that it may do precisely that.

Transformation cannot come at the expense of readiness. Adopting such a military policy would be destabilizing internationally and encourage, rather than deter, war in the middle distance. The United States must accomplish transformation while also maintaining the full spectrum of necessary capabilities.



Current force structure is based on an unfounded assumption: in 1990 the active components of the Armed Forces were prepared to defeat a Soviet attack and, since that threat was clearly much greater than any threat or combination of threats today, the military in this interwar period should be smaller and less costly. This assumption does not accord with historical reality; it prejudices the question of what force structure we need, coming to what is clearly a wrong answer.

U.S. strategy during the Cold War was supported by nuclear forces, conventional forces, and NATO forces, nuclear as well as conventional. By far the most important elements of that strategy

**transformation plans that focus only or even primarily on technology miss the point**

from the standpoint of deterring the Soviet Union were American nuclear forces in Europe and elsewhere and the independent nuclear forces of France and

Great Britain. The ground forces of Britain, France, and Germany added 18 heavy and six light divisions to the theater, bringing the total of immediately available divisions to 43. NATO hoped that such a force might halt the more than 200 divisions of the Warsaw Pact. It is certain that American forces alone could not have met that threat, nor were they intended to.

Today only the conventional forces of the active components figure into the calculus of responding to major regional crises. It is universally believed that the United States would never use nuclear weapons as long as an enemy refrained from using weapons of mass destruction—and perhaps not even then. Nuclear capabilities, important to deterring the Soviets, have thus become largely irrelevant to regional security. Nor can the United States depend on NATO. In the first place, its forces are not ours to command. Their significant involvement, particularly in any out-of-area campaign, will require time to secure and arrange. Secondly, NATO allies have cut their forces dramatically. The only extant forces to deter regional aggression are American.

Finally, conventional forces maintained during the Cold War were only the leading edge of U.S. military power. A conflict with the Soviet Union would surely have involved mobilization. Perhaps millions of Americans would have been called to arms. Standing conventional forces were calculated based on what was needed to halt or delay an advance by the Soviets long enough to mobilize behind that shield, not on what it would take to win. MRCs are not wars of national mobilization. The conventional forces maintained in peacetime will be the only assets available for such conflicts. Mobilization would take place only in a real military catastrophe.

## The Biggest Battalions

Moreover, in considering the likely flow of events in a major theater war, it becomes clear that America's force posture is as mistaken as its force structure. The major theater war of the future is likely to begin with an enemy attack on a regional ally. It will follow the enemy's timetable. It will probably incorporate the salient lesson of the Gulf War: don't let the Americans build up. It will likely be designed to deny access to the region and to culminate in an acceptable situation before the United States can react in a meaningful way. Thus the task will be to respond rapidly and decisively to a fast-paced, no-notice attack in the face of efforts to deny access to the region. If accomplished, the likelihood of rapid and relatively inexpensive success is high. If not, the war may drag on, perhaps stalemating and imposing a greater burden and higher casualties than the Nation is prepared to bear.

While current heavy forces militate against such a rapid deployment, something that must be addressed, it is essential not to compromise lethality and survivability once forces arrive in theater. But transformation plans that focus only or even primarily on technology miss the point. The real test will be how many troops are ready to go without notice at any time. The short answer is that a third can be expected to be prepared while another third trains to relieve it and the last third stands down. Therefore the basic sizing metric must be that forces should be large enough that one-third will be able to deploy and defeat a large-scale attack.

But this metric must not be applied to potential enemies as they exist. If, as many believe, neither Iraq nor North Korea could attack with any reasonable guarantee of success even in the face of a minimal U.S. commitment, then they will not attack. Instead, if either they or other states are determined to take actions that will bring them into a conflict, they are almost certain to wait until they are better prepared. Forces must not be sized against what enemies can field today but against what they could field in the future by preparing now. It is apparent, for instance, that our ten-division Army, which provides in principle (if not in practice because of budget-related training shortfalls) three ready divisions, could not face such a threat, nor could the three air expeditionary forces that the Air Force might be expected to keep on alert. The precise force cannot be calculated without reference to possible threats, theaters, and missions, information available in detail only to military planners and their chiefs; but it seems unlikely that any force short of fifteen divisions and fifteen air expeditionary forces would be sufficient.

Soldiers near  
Mucibaba, Kosovo.



982 Signal Company (Bronco A. Suzuki)

Forces adequate to conduct smaller-scale operations such as Haiti and Bosnia cannot be drawn from this pool for an extended time without cutting into the ability to respond to no-notice attacks. This fact will not be lost on an enemy. The past decade suggests that the United States will need another division-equivalent on call to deploy to sustain operations in smaller-scale contingencies around the world.

Finally, it is time to abandon the Cold War model of Army organization. The Air Force and Marine Corps have already largely reorganized. The Army, however, retains the division as the basic maneuver unit and the corps as the fundamental chess-piece in the operational theater. It still attempts to benefit from economies of scale which such an organization provides in areas of combat support and combat service support. Unfortunately the Army has not generally deployed divisions over the past decade but has sent brigade-sized units as necessary, supported by combat support and combat service support units drawn from division and corps support groups. Thus when one brigade deploys, the ability of the entire division to train or deploy suffers. At the same time, divisions do not train to fight as a unit; rather the Army trains one brigade at a time. To send forces into a large-scale conflict without notice, the Army would either have to send divisions that represent a hodgepodge of ready and

unready units or cobble together ready brigades from all divisions in the force. It is time to break this pattern, and the concepts laid out in *Breaking the Phalanx: A New Design for Landpower in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by Douglas Macgregor offer a solution. He would create all-arms, brigade-sized units with robust organic support that can deploy, fight, and sustain themselves independently as well as fit neatly into a fully joint theater environment. Whether that model or another is chosen, it is clear that such an organizational transformation is essential.

America is at a crossroads. It can address the underfunding the Armed Forces have suffered over the past decade, undertake the reorganization, reequipping, and reorientation so badly needed in this interwar period, and take seriously the tasks that must be accomplished to maintain the peace, or the Nation can withdraw from the international scene, cut forces, reduce preparedness, fail to transform, and reap the whirlwind. America's best hope lies in learning the lessons of history and avoiding past mistakes. **JFQ**